

# **Tattooing in Copper**

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Patricia Nelson".

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## Tattooing in Copper

### Abstract

The true artistry of tattooing lies with the ability of an artist to fit small paintings done with inks and needles on to a specific anatomical plane indicated by customers. We as art student's rarely get to experience the beauty of marrying a two-dimensional symbol to a three-dimensional canvas. I would like to approximate the art and science of applying such a mark by crafting a body of work using metalsmithing techniques that celebrates tattoo application.

Tattoos have the wonderful capability to be either blatantly colloquial or startlingly erudite. They distill complex and multifold concepts, storylines, and values into a succinct icon which, for a lifetime is a badge of honor by one whose skin becomes the vehicle for expression, intimacy, and individuality.

### Acknowledgements

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## Artist Statement

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For each of my five vessels I chose shapes from different cultures that would allow me to explore various techniques of angle raising. The five tattoo motifs are traditional and contemporary designs from five cultures which have particularly rich histories of tattoos. The designs do not speak to the vessels in terms of content, only in terms of fit. Tattoos don't necessarily mirror the wearer's historical culture, but they do adroitly fit the wearer's own body and surpassing self-culture.

I was particularly interested in the elegant way a two-dimensional construct is fitted on to a three-dimensional, organic plane. Tattoos become artworks tailored to specific sculptural artifices, accentuating the beautiful landscape that is the human body. Raised copper vessels are the metalsmith's natural counterpart to the human body, since copper's softness makes it easy to form into a three dimensional composition, and its inherent malleability and vitality lends itself especially well to chasing and repoussé. I often felt myself in awe of the similarity between the action of chasing and repoussé on copper to that of ancient *tatau* on human skin. Clearly art of all kinds was born of something far greater, far more inherent and permanent than we as artists can ever fully fathom. It is my hope that my senior show purports some of these intangible ties and garners a greater appreciation for the artistry of tattooing.

## Irezumi Pot Artist Statement

Japanese tattooing, or *irezumi*, is thought to originate as early as the Jōmon period (13000-300 BC) and was used in ancient times to mark criminals. The large kanji (character from the Japanese writing system derived from Chinese characters) is an example of this kind of criminal tattoo. It is the character for dog, and would have been tattooed one stroke at a time on the forehead of the perpetrator, delineating the number of crimes committed. Its bearer forever is marked as an outlaw in society.

In later years tattoos gained more popular appeal. Full back and arm tattoos were worn by geisha or samurai under their clothing. The tattoos were linear with beautiful shading, much like *yūzen* dyeing (technique in which a linear resist paste is painted on fabric, then the design is dyed and resist removed) or *ukiyo-e* (woodblock print) occurring contemporaneously with *irezumi*.

I drew inspiration from the short story by Junichiro Tanizaki called "The Tattooist" for the artistic merit and intent of *irezumi*. "The Tattooist" speaks of the masochistic machinations of one man who seduces a young girl into being tattooed, and in doing so, created a monster. "The Tattooist" is an example of art for art's sake in literature, and the beautiful and slightly morbid feel of the story is the feeling I wanted to evoke in my artwork. One view of the pot shows the visage of a grinning *hannya* mask. *Hannya* masks were traditional of Noh Theater and represent a jealous woman whose anger and envy turned her in to a demon. I think this mask is the most poignant homage to Tanizaki's short story.

Flora and fauna considered auspicious at the time were often key elements of *irezumi*. I chose the image of a carp swimming upstream to a gate. This picture references a story known as "Dragon's Gate" which tells of how koi fish, if they can survive the swim upstream on the Yellow River, can pass through the Dragon Gate and turn in to a dragon. I used a *torii* or

sacred gate used in Japanese architecture to represent the Dragon Gate. Having a tattoo of this kind on one's arm would indicate that the bearer himself is going through a trial like the koi, and wishes to come out similarly triumphant. I also put a sakura or cherry blossom branch on the piece, homage to the national flower of Japan. Sakura blossoms are popular filler in Japanese tattoo designs.

Modern tattoos can be abominations of the glory once attained by Japanese irezumi artists. Most evident of this iniquity is the random consumption of kanji by tattoo enthusiasts. Many times people will get kanji tattoos with little to no knowledge of the true implications of the kanji they have selected. There are instances of people trying to get a kanji meaning one thing, and being tattooed by a cruel or ignorant artist with a kanji meaning completely another. For instance the character "dog" used for criminals can be changed from meaning "dog" to "big" or "fat" simply by moving around the small stroke on the upper right hand side of the character. Imagine the damage that could be done by moving around the strokes on a more complicated kanji! I decided to put a popular aphorism on this piece to refer to the problem of uneducated kanji usage in tattoos. I have placed the kanji phrase "Ji Ga Ji San" which means "Every potter praises his own pot." Although by looking at the characters one might assume I were saying something deep and beautiful about the work I've created, really it's a tongue-in-cheek slight at we artists who think too highly of that which our hands create.

My purpose in the Japanese tattoo piece was to create an image that looked layered and full like that of an arm sleeve on a human body. The overlapping images fit on to the ampere base the way they would around the upper arm and shoulder or lower arm and elbow of a human form. I hope this piece encourages viewers to research more in depth behind the legends, literature, and culture of Japan.









## Celtic Knotwork Hisago

Celtic knots are an almost infinite source of interesting linear tattoo designs. The looping, interweaving, and continuity of the line allude to humanity and the twisted paths our lives take. Celtic knots were a tool for meditation: studying line's course can apparently drive one to a spiritual calm as easily as such a task would drive me to insanity.

The most prominent design on the bottom of the vessel is a Celtic "Tree of Life" tattoo. To the Celts, trees were a source of life: their wood provided fuel for warmth, material for houses and everyday articles, and heat for cooking. In Celtic mythology demi-gods such as druids and wood nymphs were believed to inhabit trees. The Celtic tree represents all these things as well as life, growth, and longevity. I chose this tattoo because I have a great affinity for trees. They represent to me security, stability, and wisdom. Opposite the tree is a Celtic cross. Historically, this symbol was actually a modified quartered circle; the variant was used to celebrate the Celtic sun god Taranis. After conversion to Christianity, the cross came to be an emblem of the Celtic Christian Church. I chose the cross because religion once played a major role in my life. Although I no longer am particularly tied to religion, its importance in my life path should not be denied. In between the tree and the cross are two triskele or triple spirals. In this tradition spirals are a reference to the heavens and eternity. Three spirals together can be seen as alluding to the three domains of material existence: earth, water, and sky.

On the top of the vessel is one of the most famous Celtic knot symbols. To me much of its meaning has been lost: although it has its roots in the triquetra, it has become more of a design motif than an apologue. Its popularity as a tattoo design sharply increased after the symbol appeared on the popular TV series "Charmed" where it was used as a symbol purportedly for the three women protagonists: three in one. The two triquetra flanking it are the symbol from which the Celtic knot was elaborated. Triquetra



originally were used as a symbol for the god Odin, but, like the cross, was converted to bear a Christian meaning. It now is commonly believed to represent the Trinity, or Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Opposite the Celtic Knot is design representing sisterhood. This knot is one of the most important on the vessel to me because it helps me feel closer to my two sisters, Lillian and Cassandra. I think that is one of the best uses of a tattoo: to make one feel closer to the reason behind the design.

This vessel is a traditional Japanese vessel known as a hisago. Hisago are flagons carried like canteens by travelers. Their most common content is sake. I made this hisago with a bayonet hinge so that the top and bottom can be taken apart and sake can be poured from one to the other. I like the idea of two travelers meeting along a road and one pouring a cup of sake for the other. I was thinking of the shape of this vessel in terms of a rounded body part for a tattoo. I see the hisago as mirroring a joint such as the ankle, the shoulder, or the knee. This vessel and the tattoos marking it are definitely the most vague in my mind. I feel no particular affinity for Celtic culture, so the symbolism is a bit lost on me. Raising these tiny knobs were the most difficult component of all the vessels, and solving how it should be displayed was a conundrum. I think unfortunately these problems are evident in the vessel as disparate knots of information not yet tied together. Were I to re-do any piece, the Hisago Celtic Knot would fit.





## Native American Double Bowl Artist Statement

The tattoos I have chosen for this piece are a combination of contemporary and traditional designs. Some hold personal meanings for me, some are simply important in the context of history. Neoterically, people are drawn to Native American tattoos most commonly if they have discovered a tribal ancestry. A tattoo of a Native symbol would help tie them to their heritage and honor their ancestors, most of whom they probably never have met and know little about. Historically, Native American warriors would get tattoos as signs of their accomplishments, prowess, and strength.

Most prominent in this bowl is the dream catcher design. Dream catchers were originally used by the Chippewa tribe as charms for infants. Mothers tied sinew around bent wood frames and hung the charms above beds of infants in order, purportedly, to catch nightmares and protect the dreams of the young. During the 60s and 70s more tribes began adopting this practice, and dream catchers became a kind of pan-Indian symbol. I chose the dream catcher not only because it is a stereotypical icon of Native American culture, but also because it holds personal meaning for me. There was a period of my life during which I experienced unsettling dreams nightly. They were enough to cause insomnia; sleep frightened me. My mother encouraged me to make a dream catcher to hang above my bed, hoping that the object would, if nothing else, have a placebo effect on my sleep. I believe that this sense of security was the reason these objects came in to use by the Chippewa. Having a tattoo of a dream catcher could serve as a kind of permanent charm for the bearer. It is a symbol of spiritual cleansing and self-purity. Most dream catchers have a silver charm at the center of the sinew to represent a spider on the web. I have chosen to use a literal spider to reference the Southwestern Native American creation story of the Spider Woman. A tattoo representing the Spider Woman references creation and new beginnings.

The design partially obscured by the dream catcher is a linear tattoo that would have been granted an honored warrior. Its right and left sides curved around the décolletage and its center pointed down the middle of the ribcage. The other geometric lines that run along the edges of the bowl are ones that would have been worn on the face from the corners of the mouth to the edge of the cheekbone. Both men and women alike would have used these designs. The face tattoos are some of the most beautiful Native American designs in my eyes, mostly because they have not become clichéd by unwitting tattoo consumers today. I find it difficult to believe that anyone would unwittingly wear such a symbol.

Two animals considered to be sacred in traditional beliefs are displayed on the left right half of the bowl. On top is a wolf. The wolf has several different roles in Native American mythology depending on specific tribal legends. In the Shoshone tradition, the wolf was a creator figure. In the Plains he is a trickster, a deceitful creature much like our Judeo-Christian view of a snake. Tribes such as the Pawnee and the Lakota view the wolf as a healer or teacher of Shamans and often attribute wolves to vision quests.

All of these ideas have personal meanings for me. My wolf tattoo represents a Native American friend who got me through a hard time in my life. I had been sick for many years and required hospitalization. My wolf helped mentor me through this time and taught me much about myself and the outside world which, alone, I never would have comprehended and actualized. After leaving the hospital I went through several Native American rituals with him such as sweat lodges, a coming-of-age ceremony, and a changing ceremony. By these means I was able to create a new and better version of myself. But in the end, my wolf tricked me and left me to fend for myself. I'm sure many people have experienced similar deceptions in relationships. In the end, it is just one more lesson to be learned.



The wolf's left eye is partially obscured by a bear paw print. A Native American warrior would wear a bear print tattoo on his pectorals as a sign of honor and accomplishment: bear paws mean strength. In real life my friend had been attacked as a child by a wolf, losing use of the tear glands in his eye and leaving permanent scars and damage. Ironically, this attack is how the wolf came to be his animal spirit guide. It is both odd and poignant I see him as the animal that ruined and sculpted his life.

Underneath the wolf tattoo is the visage of a bison. The bison was perhaps the most revered animal in many tribes. They depended on this beast for food, clothing, and shelter. Not only does the bison have practical meaning, it also has spiritual importance. A legend tells of a white buffalo calf that was an avatar of the goddess White Painted Lady, who brought the holy pipe to the Sioux tribe. Other legends speak of her as a maternal goddess. In the changing ceremony, adolescent girls are painted with white clay while dancing all night in a ritual to become a White Painted Lady and turn from a girl into a woman. The buffalo is partially obscured because 1. The buffalo have been hunted almost to extinction at one point by European settlers enraging native tribes, and 2. I am not yet the woman I am meant to be, so the bison is not fully actualized.

On the buffalo's forehead is a cross symbol enclosed in a circle. Unbeknownst to most Judeo-Christian practitioners, the cross appears in many tribal religions across the globe. In most Native American uses, the cross, or quartered circle refers to the number four and its manifold meanings. When examined, the number four can be understood on many levels. It can mean: the four seasons (spring, summer, fall, winter), the four elements (fire, water, earth, air), the four races (according to many Native American traditions there are four races: Black, Red, White, Yellow), the four sections of day (morning, afternoon, evening, night), the four phases of life (childhood, adolescence adulthood, old age) and many, many other things. The quartered circle or cross is also seen as a focusing of energies into the middle of the design, a

medicinal wheel, or the circle of life. The organization of which I took part, Warriorschoool, used this symbol as their most sacred design.

I chose the bowl shape for two reasons. Abstractly, I see Native American traditions as pertaining to a bowl shape: receiving, open, unassuming. I also felt like a bowl was a close representation of the human back when in a relaxed position. An interior concave space such as a bowl refers nicely to the space between relaxed or even tightened together scapula on the back (if not obscured by too much fat). When the shoulders are rounded forward, the back takes on a convex appearance, kind of like an exterior bowl. I was thinking of this vessel in terms of a back tattoo piece.

Native American mythology is a web of tribal traditions interlacing, overlapping, and breaking apart. It is hard to pull individual threads of information about symbols because they tie in to so many different legends and traditions. I have used these symbols as I understood them and as they apply to my life. It is my hope that the viewer can think about how these symbols might apply to his or her own experience and come to a greater actualization of self.





## Tatau Goblet Artist Statement

*Tatau*, or the ancient art of tattooing, was originally done with tiny hammers and combs filled with needles dipped in ink. A tattoo master would spend hours or even days tattooing his subject, usually a male undergoing a coming-of-age ritual. In Maori tribes, only the most esteemed warriors were allowed to get the honored facial tattoos that you see on this goblet. They were a sign of power and respect, meant to inspire his comrades and frighten his enemies. The Maori have the strongest affinity for tattoos of any culture I researched. It seems that every tribesperson of importance had a tattoo, be it the esteemed facial tattoos of the warriors to chin and cheek tattoos for women to full tattoos on the buttocks, around the ankles, and on the chests of everyone else. The crown-like design in between the two faces of the bowl is meant to represent linear designs that would have wrapped around small appendages such as the ankles or wrists. I chose to chase two small faces in the goblet because I didn't feel that the linear designs would have read as tattoos without the context of a face. The base is forged to mirror the curves in the facial tattoo. I like how the goblet stands its forged base like a Maori warrior.





## Silver Tattoo Jewelry Artist Statement

These three jewelry pieces are intended as wearable and removable tattoos. It is interesting to me that in the modern state where nothing, not a thing is permanent we've naturally come up with a way to remove tattoos. Ink once married with flesh can now be nixed as easily as the once unshakeable foundation of marriage can now be divorced or annulled. The concept of a profession is quickly becoming antiquated; people change jobs as readily as shoes. We've come up with ways to abort unwanted pregnancies, drugs to change moods and personalities, paroles to get out of jail . . . you name it, and we don't have to live with it anymore. I'm not saying these are all evils of society. I just think sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking we don't have to make good choices because we can just erase our mistakes. These tattoos don't have to be removed with painful lasers. You can just slip them on and off, like everything else these days.

The first piece, the tree pin, is an amalgamation of many ideas. I was inspired by a beautiful tree tattoo that had great, gnarly bark texture and a lovely silhouette. I chose to leave out the leaves from the original tattoo so that the piece's subject became more ambiguous. It could refer to roots and branches, an artery, a cloud, or whatever the mind's eye sees. It is also a reference to Chaos Theory which is "the study of unpredictable and complex dynamic systems that are highly sensitive to small changes in external conditions". Chaos theory is what governs the formation of fractals and therefore things like roots and arteries.

The second piece is a cuff that reads "No hay mal que por bien no venga" which means "There is no bad thing out of which good does not come". Quotes are popular resources for font tattoos that run around ankles or wrists, which is how I envisioned this piece. I chose a Spanish phrase because I had dearly wanted to do a piece about Cuban tattoos but found out that tattoos are technically illegal in Cuba. Tattooists can get away with the practice if they register

as "artists" and pay a fee to the government, but can't really advertise or be renowned. This is a piece to celebrate my heritage and the application of quote tattoos.

The third piece, an Aum ring, is meant to be a finger tattoo ring. It is a reference to the Henna tattoos popular in India. The top symbol, *Aum*, is a Sanskrit word used in meditation by Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. It is resting on top of a lotus blossom which is a symbol of the Buddha as well as for beauty and eternity in Hinduism.

These silver pieces are indications of where my work will go if I continue making tattoo pieces. They are wearable, delicate, and pretty (unlike the copper pieces) which make them infinitely more marketable than the large copper pieces. I like that they have a kind of subversive undertone about the impermanence of life in our society, but that the wearer may never, ever know it.